

Sustainable Change

UPPING YOUR STAFF TRAINING STRATEGY

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Program managers frequently put staff training near the top of their lists of ongoing challenges. The mix of diverse, complex training needs in many programs means managers may be responsible for orienting new staff, implementing new administrative procedures, or facilitating steps toward long-term program improvement. The greatest underlying challenge here is that any or all of these may require staff to adapt how they approach their daily work. Change can be hard, and often, managers find that one-time training isn't enough to ensure staff apply new concepts and procedures in their daily work.



In much of MDRC's work with programs, we view training as taking place within an iterative cycle of learning that we call "Learn-Do-Reflect," in which trainers, program managers, and program developers work collaboratively with front-line staff in the following ways:

- LEARN:** Identify and define an area for learning or improvement. Staff may help brainstorm potential solutions. Offer training on new approaches.
- DO:** Staff test out the proposed solutions while collecting data to help evaluate successes and roadblocks.
- REFLECT:** Managers and staff review data, examine their experiences, propose course corrections, and decide on next steps.

Unlike top-down management strategies, the Learn-Do-Reflect cycle engages staff, getting them to propose and evaluate solutions. That can help teams feel more invested in making changes to their daily work. The cycle can be repeated from time to time and incorporated into training strategies to promote continuous improvement over time.

We think about training as part of a multipronged approach to professional development that may include one or more of the following:

- **Training** delivered in a group setting, in person, or via video or other digital platforms. Approaches may include initial training, for example on a specific program model, service delivery approach, or curriculum. Programs may also offer ongoing, in-service training.
- **Coaching** through a collaborative process, wherein a dedicated coach demonstrates a new technique, observes staff trying it out individually or in small groups, and provides feedback, with staff actively reflecting on areas for improvement.
- **Peer learning communities** in which staff meet with peers to share challenges and strategize solutions
- **Supervision** in which supervisors are responsible for ensuring that staff roles and responsibilities are carried out. Focus areas may include ensuring fidelity to the program model, managing caseloads, and overall service quality. The reflective model provides a time and place for staff to discuss and reflect on caseloads, with the goal of improving practice. Some

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approaches may also seek to create a supportive environment to address the stress of working with high-risk populations.

For some topics, one-time trainings delivered in a workshop or training video do the trick. For example, new administrative procedures can easily be taught in short sessions, and progress reviewed in staff meetings. In other cases, especially when staff are implementing new services or curricula, a broader, multifaceted approach may be needed. The Learn-Do-Reflect framework can be applied within each of these training and post-training support activities.

Here are some examples of how we've put the Learn-Do-Reflect framework to work in our trainings with program staff.

TRAINING NEED: Staff must now complete a new administrative form during the intake process.

LEARN: Managers organize an interactive training. Staff role play filling out the new form and entering data, and, back at their desks, complete a mini Learn-Do-Reflect process to note what went well and any challenges they anticipate.

DO: Staff begin using the new form on a designated date, keeping a log of any challenges and/ or recording problems in a management information system (MIS).

REFLECT: Managers and staff gather after using the form in real time, examining MIS data and sharing staff experiences to evaluate what went well, what was challenging, and areas for improvement.

TRAINING NEED: Agency adopts a new services model that includes two core services — weekly workshops and one-on-one meetings with counselors.

LEARN: Staff learn the workshop curriculum from an outside teacher hired for the training. The teacher is also responsible for one-on-one meetings. The training includes interactive role play, followed by bi-weekly coaching sessions to help staff apply the new techniques.

DO: Staff begin facilitating workshops and holding one-on-one meetings, collecting information in the agency's MIS to help track progress, problem areas, and questions.

REFLECT: Managers meet with staff as a group in between their coaching sessions, and ask staff to share successes, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. The group uses a Learn-Do-Reflect model to test out any adjustments to the original model. Supervisors check in with staff individually in a similar fashion.

In both examples, the Learn-Do-Reflect framework is applied both within initial trainings, and continues post-training as part of an ongoing review process.

Training Tip: Time for hands-on practice is important when learning new approaches. Games, role playing, and visual learning techniques like storyboarding can help make concepts come to life and build positive connections among team members.

Stay tuned! Future In Practice posts will explore training-related topics in more depth, such as models for coaching, engaging adult learners, and running online learning communities.